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Noxon, Frank Wright

Excess prophets

[Chicago]

[1920]

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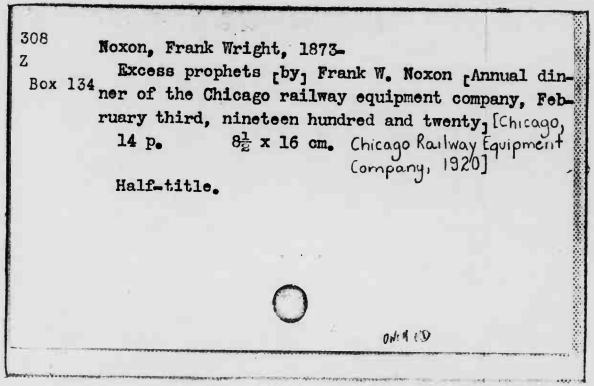
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Noxon, Frank Wright, 1873-
Excess prophets [by] Frank W. Noxon [Annual dinner of the Chicago railway equipment company, February third, nineteen hundred and twenty] [Chicago, Chicago Railway Equipment Company, 1920]
14 p. 8½ x 16 cm.

Half-title.

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EXCESS PROPHETS

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EXCESS PROPHETS

FRANK W. NOXON

ANNUAL DINNER OF THE CHICAGO RAILWAY EQUIPMENT COMPANY, FEBRUARY THIRD, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY.

W. S. GILBERT has portrayed for us the utmost limit of misery which could afflict a billiard player. It was one of the humorous torments to which the Emperor of Japan sentenced sundry culprits. For the billiard player, torture was to consist not in being deprived of his game, but in being condemned to play it eternally under conditions diabolically contrived:

"On a cloth untrue,
With a twisted cue
And elliptical billiard balls."

Did you ever stop to think what new terrors such a penalty would have added to the fate of Robinson Crusoe? We have recently been assured that where there are wild men there must be wild women. We have been challenged to say where Crusoe and Friday went Saturday night. If Crusoe had been condemned to drive elliptical spheres on a corduroy table with the spiral equipment prescribed in the Gilbertian decree, how far along would he have got toward Saturday night before himself being overtaken by wildness, not to say imbecility? But nothing

of the sort could have happened. Marooned on his island, safe from mikados and czars, kaisers and kings, Robinson was monarch of all he surveyed; his was the supreme freedom; he could make a new billiard kit to suit himself or invent a new game. Crusoe was not only immune from ukases and whims of monarchs; he escaped the despotism of mobs and of prophets.

There's paradise for you! Of all the thorns and thistles to which the seed of Adam was sentenced in the Garden of Eden, of all the conditions which conspire that man shall eat bread in the sweat of his face, the distinguished service medal must be pinned on certain kinds of prophets.

Of prophets there are various kinds. Some are harmless, even useful. Nothing that I ask you to hear is lacking in reverence or gratitude toward the Old Testament figures, who have endured by just desert, though I am far from approaching any of them in awe.

Take Malachi. Scholars dispute about this prophet. Some say he did not exist. Others contend there was no such prophet, and that the book of Malachi

was written by another man of the same name at the same place at the same time, like the Germans when somebody else sank the Sussex. Whether it was Malachi or some other Malachi, his specialty was calling the attention of the priesthood to the terms of their contracts and drawing a picture of what a real priest would be like. Something of the sort has been going on of late in New York. Some Manhattan Malachis invited the attention of the Bishop to a clergyman who was running a red forum in his church; and henceforward that church will be used no more for red purposes.

Or consider Jeremiah. Here was a prophet who rebuked crime in high places. The king was Jehoiakim. This despot said, "I will build me a wide house and large chambers," and cutteth him out windows; and it is ceiled with cedar and painted with vermilion. According to Jeremiah this monarch of the vermilion taste was as doubtful a character on Saturday night as Crusoe and Friday; for Jeremiah exclaims, "Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor's service without

wages and giveth him not for his work." Only the other day the sovereign of these United States was brought to the knee by Jeremiahs who rebuked him for underpaying the railroads on mail traffic; and hereafter Uncle Sam promises to avoid in that matter unrighteousness and wrong and is making restitution of his ill-gotten rebates.

Isaiah, on the other hand, turned his pruning hooks upon the people themselves for their feebleness. "As for my people," he said, "children are their oppressors and women rule over them." There is no modern application of this. The American husband and father can make his wife and cherubim do anything they want to.

In addition to the prophets of rebuke there are the martyrs. An eminent example was Daniel, who operated in Babylon accompanied by Athos, Porthos and Aramis. Daniel had certain convictions as to fundamentals. He allowed himself to be cast into a den of lions rather than make radical concessions. Every day all around us we see Americans who predict the woe which surely will come if

the people harken unto false political gods—Americans who would rather be thrown to the political lions than pretend they have faith in the strange doctrines which hucksters go peddling up and down.

It is not the useful prophets who are thorns and thistles and who conspire that man shall eat bread in the sweat of his face. It is certain other kinds. Prophets often harass those who are trying to do something by attacking their characters. This was well understood by Moses. The children of Israel were becoming careless about observing the tribal customs of conduct. He thought it would be a good idea if these customs could have the sanction of law. He drew up a code and had it engrossed on stone; but when he came to the point of promulgating it he batted an eye. One of the laws was, "Thou shalt not kill." Now down in Egypt Moses had killed a native for abusing another Hebrew, and he knew perfectly well that every thug in the country would cry out, "Who are you, with your 'Thou shalt not kill'? You killed a man yourself down in Egypt." Moses therefore refrained from proclaiming the ten commandments as his own

and said that literally the Lord had given them to him on Mt. Sinai. In the twentieth century after Christ and the thirty-fifth after Moses human nature is running about true to form. Do Americans strive to codify and confirm ancient fundamentals? Their escutcheons are scraped and the scrapings analyzed with acid and microscope. Meantime those who thus turn public attention from substance to personality are permitted by common consent or common negligence to get away without challenge of their credentials.

Roasting the pioneer, indeed, is the tribal sport of the excess prophetic breed. The domes of many of these thinkers are laboratories for driving the abstract into the concrete. The Lord told Ezekiel just that. Saith the Lord, "As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead." Prophets of adamantine mansard include the naggers—the brethren who never have carried responsibility themselves and in any piece of work can see nothing to talk about but the defects. When Josiah Quincy the elder was Mayor of Boston a lady accosted him in the middle of the street. "Mr. Mayor," she said, "the manners of these street sweepers are

intolerable." "I know it, Madam," he replied. "I have offered the position to all the leading citizens but none of them will take it." Lincoln was continually nagged by men who could only see a part of his problem. Some of them came in time to see what nuisances they had been.

Prophets who have political or literary ambition may practice personal accusation as an inexpensive method of attracting attention to themselves. Some prophets and multitudes of their pupils accuse from a motive which appears to be exactly the opposite—that of distracting attention from themselves. Human motive is beyond proof. But in an era of extravagance, of loose conduct, of impaired standards, we are bound to be on guard against the possibility that consciously or unconsciously legions around us are tainted with guilt and seeking to escape detection and penalty by pointing the finger at somebody else.

Serious workmen in the world's great tasks are bedeviled by other prophets than those who carp. There was Amos. When he had delivered a number of oracles reflecting on Amaziah, the high priest, the pontiff charged him with doing

it for graft. In our day it is not necessary to establish proof that a prophet is making his noise on salary or commission. Enough to know that what he is trying to accomplish would bring him and his crowd something for nothing. A group, for example, might ask us to give them the railroads. These would be "prophteers."

Finally there are those prophets, not necessarily self-seekers, whose distracting and demoralizing activity consists in the promotion of revolutionary schemes conceived in ignorance of human experience. Such schemes waste the time and energy of their promoters, who might otherwise be fitting themselves to be at large; they befuddle great numbers of citizens who have real problems grievously needing attention; they complicate and intensify the difficulties of those who are trying to lead civilization forward by steady steps from good to better.

What would you think of establishing credentials for prophets? Could we have an excess prophets tax? Probably not. Could we require a license number, as for man's friend the dog, man's pilot the chauffeur, and man's ministering

angel the flu-booze apothecary? Hardly. But would it not be possible to cultivate an attitude of challenge? Why should anybody listen to a man who has done nothing to deserve being listened to?

Most of the persons in this room happen to be concerned one way or another with the problem of transportation. You are about to engage in a new phase of it. Provision and operation of carrying facilities by private capital and private management is to be tried under such conditions that if it fails now it will probably be given up. To give it up is to embrace government ownership and management. To make transportation a government function is to invite two catastrophes—the catastrophe of arresting progress in transportation at the point where it now stands with new marvels just over the horizon and of limiting national growth and prosperity in the immediate future; and the broader catastrophe of launching this republic upon a course which leads straight and swift to the abolition of property and the destruction of the civilization under which an American boy begins at the bottom and without getting elected may climb to the heights.

Who are you? Men, every one, that have devoted years to making yourselves competent.

You gentlemen take time. You train. You prepare. You are ready. You are authoritative. You are fit to listen to. You are licensed thereby to do your work immune from the pesterings of men who come into this world unannounced and will go unannounced into the next.

If you ask the literary hierarchs what is the foremost short poem in the English language they will probably mention one concerning which an anxious reader was lately reported to have inquired, "Who wrote Gray's Elegy?" Gray dashed that poem off in eight years.

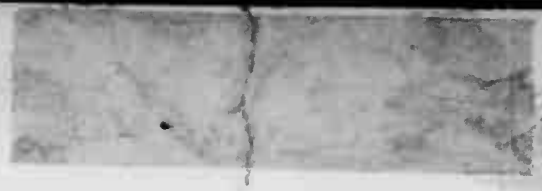
If you visit the Paris Louvre and request to see the most celebrated painting in the world they will conduct you to Murillo's "Immaculate Conception." Murillo was a youth of Seville who set out on foot for Rome to obtain training in his art; but in Madrid was taken into the house of the great Velasquez, where for

years he copied the masters. Before painting the picture in the Louvre, Murillo, to our definite knowledge, had made fourteen canvases of the same subject.

Who can recall the names of the prophets in Athens who brought charges against Phidias, the sculptor? Ask an Athenian guide to show you the supremest expression of Greek art. He will conduct you to Mt. Olympus and point out the spot. You see nothing. The guide says, "The Zeus of Phidias." Still you see nothing; for the king of the gods on his throne was destroyed centuries ago, without trace. If you would guess how he looked in marble you may examine the picture of the statue upon an ancient coin. The people of Greece in the age of Pericles had art sense and horse sense. Well did they know by what years of toil, sacrifice and discipline their Phidias had come by his truth of eye and obedience of hand. No excess prophet could prevail with them. They set Phidias free and kept him free to labor on and up. He made the immortal frieze of the Parthenon. He ascended Mt. Olympus at last and offered the crowning achievement of human record in the realm of plastic portraiture. And there after the ages the Zeus of

Phidias endures—invisible to the eye, impalpable to the hand, yet imperishable while the brain and heart of man love beauty.

As we look back over the centuries to that triumphant reality which is not but which we know once was, so in the art and science of empire building we peer forward with confidence to some monument of progress which is not yet but which to us is sure and real, reared by we cannot say what Westinghouse or Tesla, what Hill or Cassatt: and when the prophet carps and cannot produce credentials, we shall know by that sign that this is verily Cain himself, sitting on the fence whittling a stick while Abel tills the soil, until the Lord prefers the offering of Abel, and Cain in envious fury climbs down and slays the industrious benefactor.



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